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# the Korean War Fiftieth Anniversary

Commemorative Edition

## ANYTHING ANYWHERE, ANY TIME

COMBAT CARGO  
IN THE KOREAN WAR



AIR  
FORCE  
*History*  
and  
*Museums*  
PROGRAM

**William M. Leary**

A giant C-124 Globemaster tests its ability to land on a Korean runway in October 1951.

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The U.S. Air Force in Korea

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**Anything,  
Anywhere,  
Any Time**

**Combat Cargo in the  
Korean War**

William M. Leary

AIR FORCE HISTORY AND MUSEUMS PROGRAM

2000





TWENTY CENTS

DECEMBER 18, 1950

# TIME

THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE

***We now know, as we never knew it in the  
Air Force before, that we can fly  
anything, anywhere, any time. Climate,  
mountains, oceans—those can't stop us.***

**William H. Tunner, 1948**

GENERAL TUNNER, AIRLIFTER

In the midst of the enemy, a bridge from the sky.  
(*War in Asia*)

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AT 0330 ON SUNDAY, JUNE 25, 1950, the powerful North Korean People's Army (NKPA) crossed the 38th parallel and smashed into the poorly equipped South Korean units that guarded the border between the two Asian nations. For a brief time, it appeared that the army of the Republic of Korea (ROK) might be able to withstand the assault. But resistance soon collapsed. Shortly after midnight on June 27, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan (SCAP), ordered the Far East Air Forces (FEAF) to assist in the evacuation of U.S. citizens from the South Korean capital of Seoul.

The airlift began at dawn, when seven C-54s from the 374th Troop Carrier Wing and four C-46s and ten C-47s from various units in Japan flew into Seoul's Kimpo Airfield. Twice during the day, North Korean fighters attempted to interfere with the evacuation. U.S. Air Force F-82s and F-80s shot down seven of the attackers and forced the remainder to flee northward. By midnight, the transports had carried 748 people to safety in Japan.

It quickly became clear that air transport would be necessary to deliver urgently needed supplies to the retreating ROK army. Unfortunately, airlift assets in the Far East were meager. FEAF's major transport unit, the 374th Troop Carrier Wing, had two squadrons of C-54s at Tachikawa Air Base, near Tokyo, and one squadron at Clark Air Base in the Philippines. In addition, FEAF could call upon the 13 C-46s and 22 C-47s that were scattered about Japan in a variety of units.

This dearth of airlift resources in the theater reflected more general problems in the U.S. Air Force. The years since World War II had been marked by a series of draconian cuts in the military budget by President Harry S. Truman, culminating in a spending cap of \$14.3 billion for fiscal year 1950. The air force, with limited funds, gave priority to the purchase of combat aircraft, especially bombers. Transports ranked far down on the Pentagon's spending list. FEAF would have to make do with what it had on hand until additional airlift units could be sent from the United States.

On June 28, air transports operating under the control of Fifth Air Force carried 150 tons of ammunition from Japan to Korea for hard-pressed ROK units. The next two days saw an additional 400 tons delivered. At one point, the North Korean air force managed to penetrate the U.S. Air Force fighter screen and destroy a C-54 on the ground at Suwon. Another transport was damaged beyond repair as it was about to land. These two losses were to prove the only air transport casualties to enemy air attack during the Korean War.

At 1100 on June 30, following MacArthur's visit to the front in Korea on the 29th and Truman's decision to commit U.S. ground forces to the conflict, SCAP ordered the Fifth Air Force to lift a battalion of the 24th Infantry Division from Japan to Korea. The first C-54, carrying the lead elements of the unit and its commander, Lt. Col. Charles B. Smith, left Itazuke Air Base in southern Japan at 0845 on July 1. A second C-54 departed a few minutes later.

Arriving over the port of Pusan, the transports found the field, K-1, closed due to poor weather and had to return to Japan. Later in the day, however, six

planeloads of infantry were able to land. By noon on July 2, Smith and 406 men had arrived in Korea. At that point, K-1 had to be closed to C-54s due to runway damage. The remaining elements of Task Force Smith flew from Japan in C-47s. On the evening of July 2, the battalion boarded trains for Taejon with orders to delay the North Korean advance as far north as possible along the major Seoul-Pusan highway. It took the tank-led NKPA forces less than a day to destroy Task Force Smith and continue southward.

The tragic fate of the first U.S. unit to meet the enemy in Korea sent a clear message to both Tokyo and Washington: the United States and its United Nations allies faced a formidable foe. The first objective of the war—which Truman mislabeled a “police action”—would not be to defeat the enemy; it would be to retain a foothold on the Korean peninsula.

By the end of July, the U.N. forces occupied an area around Pusan that measured approximately 80 miles from north to south and 50 miles from east to west. This Pusan perimeter contained three airfields, all in poor condition. The runway at Pusan, K-1, had been damaged earlier in the month by C-54s and now lay nearly underwater. Taegu, K-2, 50 miles north of Pusan, featured a 4,800-foot unsurfaced clay strip that was full of potholes. Engineers laid 4,300 feet of pierced steel planking (PSP) over the clay, which helped a bit, but the field remained marginal for heavy aircraft. Pohang, K-3, 55 miles north of Pusan on the east coast, was opened in mid-July but could not handle large aircraft. Indeed, C-54s could not land at any of the airfields in the perimeter.

To solve this problem, engineers were attempting to improve K-9, a former Japanese airfield nine miles east of Pusan, so that it could accommodate C-54s. But K-9 could not be ready before mid-September at the earliest. The need for suitable airfields in the perimeter became even more critical after August 3 when damage to runways caused C-46 sorties to be halted.

The deteriorating condition of airfields in the Pusan perimeter meant that C-47s had to bear the main burden of the airlift to Korea. When the fighting began, the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron at Clark Air Base had been ordered to Japan. Upon its arrival, the 21st relinquished its C-54s to the other two squadrons of the 374th Troop Carrier Wing and received C-47s that had been gathered from units throughout Japan and those that had been sent from the United States. The 21st began flying out of Ashiya Air Base in southern Japan on July 20. In August, however, the unit relocated to Brady Field. In the course of this and later moves, the 21st acquired the nickname of Kyushu Gypsies, which it would bear proudly for the remainder of the war.

The Gypsies, under the command of Lt. Col. Phil Cage, became the standard-bearer for flying urgently needed supplies from southern Japan to the Pusan perimeter. Lt. T. W. Hunt took pride of place during a hectic August, logging 100 sorties for the month. Some half-dozen other pilots flew over 80 sorties. The peak effort came during the last eight days of August, when the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron delivered 1,883 tons of supplies to Korea.

Operating procedures for the airlift tended to be ad hoc during these first weeks of the war. With inadequate or nonexistent radio navigational aids and

poor communications, transport pilots had to rely on contact flying. After crossing the Sea of Japan and Straits of Tsushima, pilots would identify the Naktong River near Pusan by spotting discolored sea water, then follow the river northward until they located the railroad tracks that would take them to Taegu, the perimeter's forward airstrip.

Scheduling of aircraft also was loosely controlled. At dawn, pilots would report to an airfield in southern Japan where they would be given a load by aerial port personnel and told to deliver it to a base in South Korea. After off-loading, they would take on people or freight for transport to another field in Korea or back to Japan. This would continue throughout the day. Because all airfields in Korea lacked lighting, operations would have to end by nightfall.

"With literally no effective communications, weather forecasts/reports, or nav-aids in South Korea," recalled transport pilot Capt. Paul C. Fritz,

21st Troop Carrier Squadron policy was simply that pilots would make a try at each assigned mission, primarily by going out and taking a look. As each "exploratory" flight progressed, pilots evaluated the mission's importance as balanced against any flying problems. Thus, a pilot with a request to pick up an urgent load of wounded troops would try much harder to make the flight than if it was lowly cargo or routine passengers. *No one was chastised for turning back.* Result was a squadron of highly skilled pilots making dependable and sincere efforts to get the job done if it was humanly possible.

Thanks to the efforts of conscientious, loyal, and competent pilots, this seat-of-the-pants system worked, but the efficiency of the airlift suffered.

## Tunner Arrives

In an effort to improve efficiency, air force headquarters on August 23 advised FEAF commander Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer that Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner could be made available to conduct airlift operations. Stratemeyer promptly accepted. Tunner, who was in Japan on an inspection visit for the Military Air Transport Service, made a quick trip to Ashiya to see the airlift in action, then flew back to the United States on August 23 to assemble a staff. He selected former subordinates who had extensive airlift experience, including Col. Glen R. Birchard as chief of staff, Col. Manuel Hernandez as head of communications, and Col. Robert ("Red") Forman as director of operations. "When we start a new airlift," Tunner pointed out, "we start in a hell of a hurry. It is a whole lot easier to start with people you know." His party, consisting of 17 officers and 5 airmen, returned to Japan on the evening of September 2.

If anyone could impose order on the haphazard character of the airlift, Tunner was the man. The air force's premier airlift specialist, Tunner had learned his trade during World War II as commander of the India-China Division of Air Transport Command. When Tunner arrived in China in September 1944, cargo flown over the treacherous "Hump" air route between India and China averaged 20,000 tons a month. Under his driving leadership, this figure





Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner

rose to more than 70,000 tons a month in July 1945. "As tonnage increased," air force historian Frank H. Heck has noted, "there was less talk about any figure to be regarded as the maximum possible achievement. General Tunner and his staff acted upon the thesis that virtually any amount could be delivered if only the requisite facilities and men were provided."

Tunner next applied his passion for efficiency to the Berlin airlift of 1948–1949. As head of the Combined Airlift Task Force, he emphasized centralized command, standardized flying procedures, and strict crew discipline. Tunner's methods produced impressive results. Tonnage into the isolated city of Berlin rose spectacularly, and the United

States triumphed over the Soviet Union in the first direct confrontation between the two superpowers during the Cold War.

Finally, in April and May 1950, Tunner commanded the Air Transport Force in Exercise Swarmer, a massive operation to test the ability of the army and air force to seize and supply an airhead within enemy territory. Many things went wrong during this exercise, but the mistakes afforded valuable lessons in air transport operations.

Tunner had a reputation as a demanding taskmaster who inspired loyalty from his men. "An unusually handsome man," air force historian Oliver LaFarge once observed, "cold in his manner except with a few intimates, somewhat arrogant, brilliant, competent, he was the kind of officer whom a junior officer is well advised to salute when approaching his desk. His loyalty to the organization he commanded was notable, and so was his ability to maintain the morale of his men." Known as "Willie the Whip," the impatient, coldly efficient, chain-smoking airlifter often boasted that "We can fly anything, anywhere, any time." Korea, with its demanding operational environment, would prove a formidable challenge for "Terrible Tunner."

Tunner and his staff hit the ground running. On September 10, 1950, after conferences at FEAFF headquarters, Combat Cargo Command (Provisional) assumed operational control of all troop carrier assets in the theater. These included the C-54s of the 374th Troop Carrier Wing; the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron, which had an average of 34 C-47s in August; the 1st Troop Carrier Group (Medium) (Provisional), which had been organized from theater assets on August 26 and consisted of two squadrons of C-46s and one squadron of C-47s; and the 314th Troop Carrier Group, a C-119 organization from Smyrna, Tennessee, that had begun to arrive in Japan in late August.

Operations Order No. 1–50 spelled out the demands of the new regime. A transport movement control system with standardized procedures would schedule all flights between Japan and Korea. Pilots had to fly specific routes at set altitudes on a rigid time schedule. The purpose of this system was to increase efficiency and minimize accidents.

Combat Cargo Command would furnish a weekly statement of airlift capacity to a newly created theater air-priorities board in Tokyo. The board would then allocate available tonnage among the army, navy, and air force, based on the tactical situation in Korea. Priorities within this weekly allocation would be set by a joint airlift control office, located within Combat Cargo's headquarters and consisting of representatives of the army, navy, and air force. Tunner's traffic section would see that the cargo was delivered efficiently.

Tunner and his staff barely had time to settle into their new headquarters at Ashiya Air Base before being caught up in MacArthur's bold end run at Inchon. Combat Cargo would eventually play a vital role in this dramatic scheme to end the war in Korea.

Planning for Operation Chromite had begun on August 12. X Corps—the 7th Infantry Division, 1st Marine Division, and supporting units—would land at Inchon, Korea's second-largest port, then drive inland, capture Seoul, and cut NKPA supply lines. Simultaneously, Eighth Army would launch an offensive from the Pusan perimeter and push northward. North Korean forces would be trapped between the two forces and destroyed.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff had initially opposed MacArthur's scheme as too risky. Lt. Gen. Walton H. Walker, commander of Eighth Army, also had his doubts about the feasibility of the plan; he believed that the troops earmarked for Inchon could be better employed in the offensive from the Pusan perimeter. But MacArthur would not be swayed. "I can almost hear the ticking of the second hand of destiny," he told the dissenters. "We must act now or we will die. . . We shall land at Inchon, and I shall crush them."

The invasion of Inchon got underway on September 15. Taken by surprise, the enemy offered only light opposition. Three days later, advance elements of



A C-54 unloads at Kimpo Airfield, September 1950.



A C-119 unloads at Kimpo Airfield shortly after its capture, September 1950.

X Corps seized Kimpo Airfield, K-14, outside Seoul. At 1055 on September 19, Tunner notified his subordinates that aircraft could begin landing on Kimpo's long, hard-surfaced runway. The first C-54 arrived at 1426. It was followed by 8 additional C-54s and 23 C-119s. The transports brought in 208 tons of supplies and personnel, with most of the matériel destined for the Airlift Support Unit, which would handle the flood of aircraft and cargo in the days ahead.

Inchon's limitations soon became painfully apparent and sparked demands from X Corps for airlift support. Due to extreme tidal currents, cargo could be landed during only 6 of the 24 hours of a day, producing a port capacity of 6,000 tons per day. With additional supplies urgently needed, Combat Cargo Command launched around-the-clock operations into Kimpo. Between September 18 and 24, Tunner's airlifters brought in 1,445 tons of ammunition, gasoline, and oil, mainly to support the 1st Marine Air Wing.

On September 24, 26, and 30, 440 sorties by C-54s and C-119s carried some 4,000 members of the 187th Regimental Combat Team from Japan to Korea. By the end of the month, daily aircraft tonnage into Kimpo had reached 800. "The Inchon landing," Tunner later pointed out, "is one of history's most glaring examples of the use of air transport as a corrector of logistic mistakes."

Thanks in part to the support provided by Combat Cargo Command, the U.N. offensive continued to go well. On September 27, the 7th Infantry Divi-





Paratroopers from the 187th Regimental Combat Team prepare to board a C-119 for a flight from Japan to Korea.

sion and the Eighth Army linked up near Osan, 20 miles south of Seoul. The South Korean capital fell to the 1st Marine Division the next day. In early October, MacArthur followed the directives of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and President Truman and ordered the Eighth Army to pursue retreating NKPA forces across the 38th parallel. At the same time, he shifted X Corps to the east coast of Korea, where it seized the port of Wonsan and began a drive toward the Yalu River.

The twin prongs of MacArthur's northern offensive made rapid progress during October. On the 18th, Eighth Army captured K-23, the airfield at Pyongyang, the North Korean capital. With its two hard-surfaced runways, Pyongyang quickly became the major airbase for the U.N. advance. Eighth Army wanted 1,000 tons a day flown into K-23. While this would strain the resources of Combat Cargo Command, Tunner promised Walker that his airlifters would meet the goal.

## Air Assault on Sunchon-Sukchon

Before the full attention of his command could be turned toward support of Eighth Army, Tunner was called upon by MacArthur to participate in a major airborne operation. Planners in Tokyo had wanted to drop the 187th Regimental Combat Team behind enemy lines as part of Operation Chromite, but the unit had not arrived in the theater in time. Carried to Kimpo by Combat Cargo Command in late September, the 187th had been kept mainly in reserve during the heavy fighting around Seoul. But MacArthur was determined to use the elite unit for an airborne assault. After conferences at FEAF headquarters on



Airdrops over Sunchon, October 20, 1950

October 10, plans were finalized for a drop in the Sunchon-Sukchon area, 35 miles north of Pyongyang. The aim of the operation was to seize critical road junctions and cut off retreating enemy forces. Planners also hoped that U.S. prisoners of war (POWs) might be liberated from the trapped North Koreans.

The 1,500 men of the 1st and 3d Battalions of the 187th Regimental Combat Team would be dropped just southeast of Sukchon to seize the town, then block two highways and a railroad that led north from Pyongyang. The 2d Battalion and supporting units, consisting of some 1,300 men, would come down near Sunchon, 15 miles east of Sukchon. Their mission was to block another highway and rail line. The 187th would hold its position while elements of the Eighth Army drove northward from Pyongyang. A linkup of the two forces was expected within two days.

Troops for this operation would be carried into combat by an armada of 76 C-119s and 40 C-47s. The C-119 could handle 42 jumpers and 15 cargo bundles weighing 300 pounds each. The smaller C-47s could accommodate 18 troopers and two 300-pound bundles. The men of the 187th Regimental Combat Team would jump from an altitude of 700 feet; heavy equipment, including 12 jeeps, 4 three-quarter-ton trucks, and 12 105-mm howitzers, would be dropped from 1,500 feet.

On October 18, the aircraft scheduled for the airdrop stood down for intensive maintenance. Walker, who harbored doubts about the need for the airborne operation, would have to do without the 1,000 tons required daily to sustain Eighth Army's offensive. Scheduled to depart from Kimpo at 0600 on October 20, the air armada had to wait until noon for bad weather to clear. Finally, the heavily loaded transports rose from the ground, gained altitude, and formed

into tight Vs. Tunner, piloting a C-54, would personally supervise the drop, which would occur under the watchful eyes of MacArthur and Stratemeyer, flying in SCAP's personal C-121.

The show began at 1400. Of the 76 C-119s that departed from Kimpo, 74 reached the drop zone and 71 actually released their cargo. Fifty of the Flying Boxcars carried troops, while 21 contained heavy equipment. All 40 of the dispatched C-47s, laden with troops and drop bundles, reached the target and discharged their loads. In all, 2,860 men jumped into the Sukchon-Suchon area with only one fatality. In addition, 301.2 tons of cargo parachuted to earth. Most of the heavy equipment survived the drop, although three 105-mm howitzers were lost. The aircraft encountered only light ground fire during the operation; one C-119 suffered minor damage.

MacArthur was delighted. After the day's operations ended, he landed at the recently captured Pyongyang airfield to hold a press conference. MacArthur modestly took credit for what he considered a brilliant tactical maneuver that would complete the destruction of the North Korean army. To MacArthur's surprise and pleasure, Stratemeyer presented him with a Distinguished Flying Cross for his "outstanding heroism and extraordinary achievement" while participating in aerial flights to Korea. MacArthur, in turn, awarded Tunner the Distinguished Service Cross.

The airborne operation continued for three more days. In all, Combat Cargo Command dropped 3,995 troopers and 592 tons of cargo. "Compared with most World War II airborne operations," historian Clay Blair has observed, "the jump was outstanding—indisputably the best combat jump the Army had ever staged." MacArthur, however, had been premature in his appraisal of the operation's tactical success. Most of the remnants of the North Korean army—with their U.S. POWs—had already fled northward. The airborne forces managed to trap only a single NKPA regiment, which they proceeded to destroy. Combat Cargo Command judged the operation "a very fine training maneuver" under realistic conditions.

## Supplying Eighth Army

With the heavy demands of the airborne adventure out of the way, Combat Cargo Command could devote its full attention to supporting Eighth Army. Between October 24 and November 2, Tunner's airmen delivered to Eighth Army 9,934 tons of supplies, mainly rations and gasoline. "As you know," Col. Albert K. Stebbins, Jr., assistant chief of staff (G-4) for Eighth Army, wrote to Tunner on November 9, "airlift has furnished practically all the supplies utilized by combat elements of the 8th Army employed north of Pyongyang." As Walker prepared to launch a final offensive to end the war, Stebbins continued, "it is considered essential that airlift of supplies continue at not less than 1,000 short tons a day."

Combat Cargo Command, Tunner recalled, "worked to the point of exhaustion" to meet the needs of Eighth Army. While Pyongyang remained the





A C-54 unloads drums of gasoline at Sinmak for Eighth Army's northern advance, October 1950.

center of the resupply effort, Tunner jumped at the opportunity to use airfields closer to the advancing front. On October 26, Eighth Army captured an abandoned communist airstrip at Sinanju on the south side of the Chongchon River. Army engineers quickly patched and rolled hard the sand and gravel runway, extending it to 5,500 feet. Combat Cargo aircraft began using K-29 on October 30, often landing in the midst of enemy sniper and artillery fire. By November 17, Tunner's airmen had delivered 4,041 tons of urgently needed supplies to advance elements of Eighth Army.

The C-46s of the 1st Troop Carrier Group led the way, shuttling supplies from Kimpo to the airfields north of the 38th parallel. The group, commanded by Lt. Col. Edward H. Nigro, had 16 operational C-46s and 32 crews at Kimpo. The pilots flew around the clock, averaging 125 hours a month. "Airfields and terrain in North Korea," Nigro pointed out, "were completely unknown to American pilots. To say the operation was hazardous would not be an exaggeration." Forward airfields were often inadequate, lacking night lighting and navigational and traffic control aids. Yet the 1st Troop Carrier Group managed to operate throughout the period without suffering an air or ground accident.

Walker was grateful for the support. "The airlift of supplies to the forward elements of the 8th Army," he told a press conference, "at a time when such an operation was our only means of supply, has permitted ground troops to continue their combat mission in the forward area. The keen appreciation of the lo-



A C-119 is unloading a jeep at an advanced air base in Korea.

gistical situation, and the efficiency with which the officers and airmen of Combat Cargo Command carried out the highly important operation again demonstrates the close cooperation that exists between ground and air in the Korean War.”

## *Mana de Cielo*

In addition to assisting Eighth Army, Combat Cargo Command also devoted a portion of its hard-pressed assets to supporting the advance of X Corps on the east coast of Korea. Because the logistical needs of X Corps could be met by seaborne means through the ports of Wonsan and, later, of Hungnam, air operations consisted mainly of emergency airdrops. In late October, a detachment of C-47s from the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron was sent to Wonsan for this mission. On December 1, an additional 11 Gypsy C-47s from Itazuke took up station at Yonpo airfield, K-27, outside of Hungnam.

Of the 361 sorties flown by the C-47s in November, none were more welcome than the seven missions of November 8 for the 2d Battalion of the 65th Regimental Combat Team. Composed mostly of men from Puerto Rico, the 65th had landed at Wonsan on November 5. Plans called for the troops to proceed north to Yonghung, then march 60 to 70 miles westward across the mountains in central Korea and link up with the right flank of Eighth Army near Tokchon. Col. W. W. Harris, commander of the 65th, believed that the ambi-

tious task assigned to his unit “had all the earmarks of playing Russian roulette with a six-shooter loaded with six live rounds and no blanks, instead of five blanks and one round of ammunition.”

The odds grew even longer after the 65th Regimental Combat Team reached Wonsan, and X Corps ordered two battalions of the regiment diverted to the 1st Marine Division. The 2d Battalion was instructed to proceed independently toward Yonghung, 60 miles to the north.

Harris decided to accompany the 2d Battalion, commanded by Col. Herman W. Dammer, as it moved out in a column of trucks. About an hour north of Wonsan, the battalion encountered harassing fire. The enemy slowed but did not stop the truck column, which reached Yonghung as darkness fell. At 0145 on November 8, an estimated two Chinese regiments stuck the 2d Battalion. The attack continued throughout the night. At the current rate of fire, Dammer informed Harris at 0500, his men would exhaust their ammunition by 0800. Harris responded to this troubling news by sending an urgent request to X Corps for an emergency airdrop. “I’ll admit right now,” Harris later wrote, “that I fully expected we would be taken prisoner before the day was over.” The survival of the battalion, he recognized, “rested on the airdrop.”

Shortly after dawn, three C-47s appeared over Yonghung and began dropping their cargo of 105-mm howitzer shells “right on target” to the trapped battalion. “What a sight that was—beautiful,” Harris recalled. “I’ve never seen anything so welcome in my entire life.” In all, seven C-47 sorties during the morning delivered 5,300 pounds of desperately needed ammunition to the hard-pressed unit. Following the resupply, the Chinese broke off the engagement and retreated into the nearby mountains.

A few days later, Harris wrote the following to Tunner:

I cannot adequately express to you and your officers and men the sincere gratitude of all of us here for the part played by the Combat Cargo Command in our operational success and undoubtedly the saving of the very lives of many of us on November eighth.

*Mana de Cielo* which is what the Puerto Rican boys from “The 65th” have appreciatively dubbed your air drop will forever be a part of the history of our outfit and an unforgettable experience for all of us.

From everyone of us to everyone who played a part in this remarkable accomplishment, this Regimental Combat Team extends a humble and sincere expression of gratitude. “The 65th” salutes the Combat Cargo Command.

## Medevac

Throughout the U.N. offensive, Tunner stressed the use of Combat Command’s aircraft to evacuate wounded soldiers to Japan. The army had been slow to accept air evacuation as the primary means of carrying wounded to rear areas. When Tunner arrived in the Far East in September, he found that two of three casualties were being moved by truck and rail to Pusan, then by



A flight nurse with the 801st Medical Air Evacuation Squadron, *above*, offers a cigarette to an evacuee of the Korean War during a C-124 flight in December 1952. Another nurse from the same unit completes paperwork, this during a C-54 flight in May 1952.

ship to Japan. Yet his aircraft frequently returned empty to Japan.

Tunner moved to correct this situation by naming Lt. Col. Allen D. Smith, commander of the 801st Medical Air Evacuation Squadron, as flight surgeon for Combat Cargo Command and directing him to expand the air evacuation efforts. Smith, Tunner recalled, “leaped at the chance to serve our country’s casualties and began working out methods by which the hitherto catch-as-catch-can methods of evacuation by surface means could be developed into a scheduled and reliable air transport system.” Smith ensured that cargo aircraft carried equipment permitting their swift conversion for carrying casualties. He then assigned nurses and medical technicians to these transports. By the end of October, 25,000 patients had been flown to hospitals in Japan.

## The Chinese Attack

By early November 1950, most U.S. commanders believed that the war in Korea would soon be over. Tunner and Stratemeyer agreed that the C-119s of the 314th Troop Carrier Group could shortly be returned to their permanent station in the United States and that Tunner could be released from his temporary duty to FEAF. Although Eighth Army had encountered sporadic resistance from Chinese “volunteers,” MacArthur was confident that the remaining enemy forces could be swept aside and the war quickly ended. On November 24, Walker commenced the final drive to the Yalu. On the night of November 25/26, however, strong Chinese forces assaulted Eighth Army. The next day, some 120,000 Chinese troops attacked X Corps. “The Chinese military forces are committed in North Korea in great and ever increasing strength,” MacArthur informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff on November 28. “No pretext of minor support under the guise of volunteers or other subterfuge now has the slightest validity. We face an entirely new war.”



Lt. Col. Edward H. Nigro

The full fury of the Chinese offensive fell against the exposed right flank of Eighth Army. The ROK II Corps quickly collapsed, endangering the entire U.N. position in northwestern Korea. On November 28, Walker ordered that all patients in forward hospitals be evacuated to Japan. Tunner promptly dispatched medical evacuation teams from Ashiya to Sinanju. At the same time, he directed Colonel Nigro of the 1st Troop Carrier Group at Kimp'o to lead the airlift.

Assisted by C-54s from the 374th Troop Carrier Wing, C-47s from the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron, and C-46s from the newly arrived 437th Troop Carrier Wing, Nigro's C-46s began around-the-



clock operations from Sinanju. As Nigro recalled,

There was no time to procure sufficient vehicles to evacuate all the wounded to the airstrip . . . In bitter cold, many degrees below zero, the three miles from the hospital to the strip had to be negotiated somehow. The wounded who could not walk were put into available vehicles or carried by their buddies to the waiting aircraft. Anyone who could walk or hobble made the three miles the best way he knew how. When they arrived at the aircraft, they were clad in pajamas, shorts, blankets, or any other garments they could snatch up on the way out to keep them warm.

Flying in and out of Sinanju became increasingly hazardous as the Chinese approached. Pilots had to contend with enemy snipers and sporadic anti-aircraft fire. At one point, an ammunition dump adjacent to the airstrip exploded, forcing the evacuation aircraft to fly through dense smoke and shell blasts.

It took 48 hours to complete the operation. When the last C-46 lifted off Sinanju with Combat Cargo's Support Unit, enemy troops had bypassed the field and were 10 miles to the south. In all, Nigro's transports brought out 2,688 patients from K-29, part of the more than 4,000 casualties that were evacuated from forward hospitals during the last four days of November.

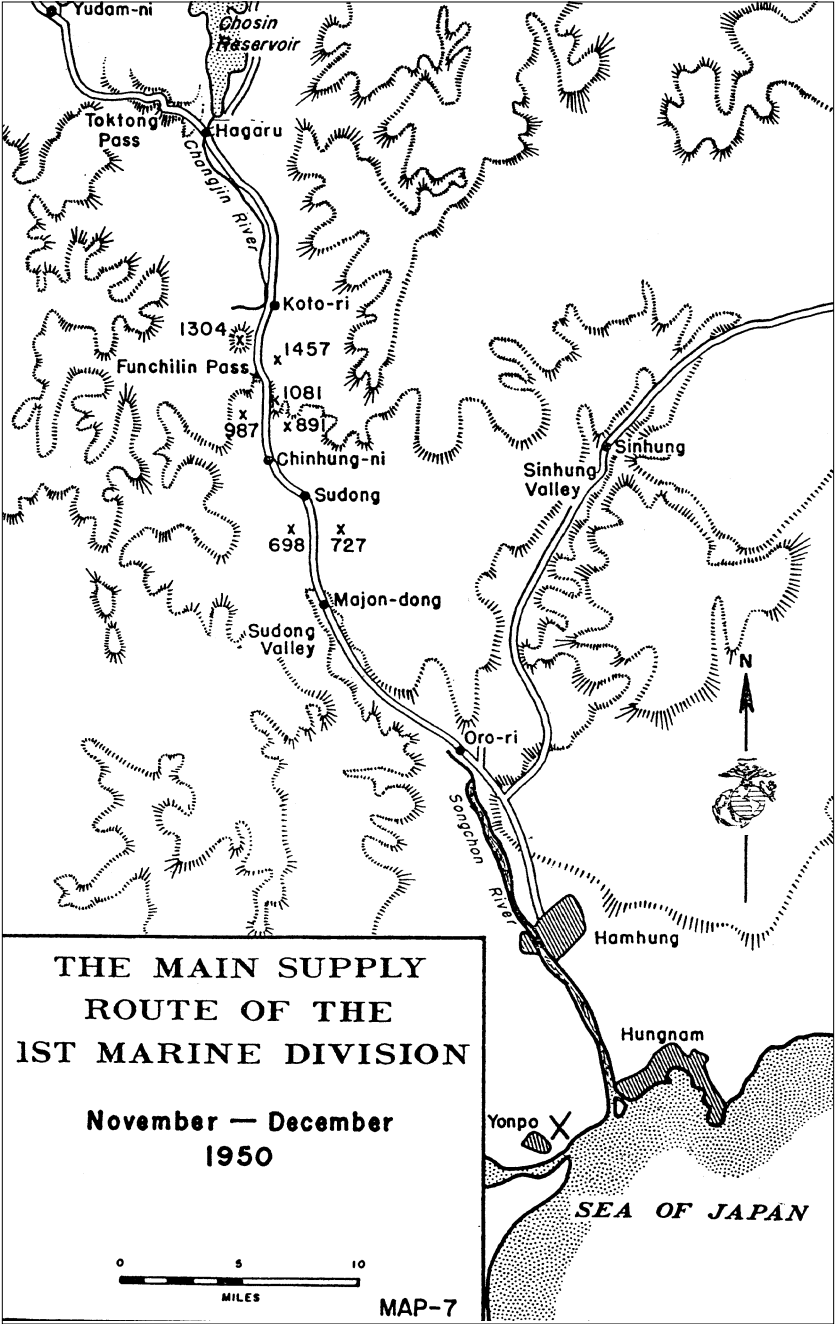
As Eighth Army's positions continued to collapse under heavy enemy pressure, Combat Cargo Command found itself conducting an airlift in reverse. The evacuation of Pyongyang began on December 1. Again, C-46s from the 1st Troop Carrier Group led the way, shuttling between K-23 and Kimp'o. In four hectic days, Combat Cargo aircraft managed to lift out most of Fifth Air Force's equipment. Eighth Army, however, had to abandon 8,000 to 10,000 tons of matériel when Pyongyang fell to the Chinese on December 5.

## The Plight of X Corps

While Eighth Army fled southward across the 38th parallel toward Seoul, the plight of X Corps in northeastern Korea grew desperate. Lt. Gen. Edward M. Almond, commander of X Corps, had begun his drive toward the Yalu in late October. As the 1st Marine Division and 7th Infantry Division proceeded along the dirt and gravel road that led from Hungnam to the Chosin Reservoir, they fought a sharp engagement with Chinese troops at Sudong during the first week of November. After this encounter, however, the enemy vanished.

After passing through Chinhung-ni, 43 miles from Hungnam, the road north took a steep climb into the mountains. "For the most part," a marine noted, "it was one-way and had numerous hairpin turns, with turnouts every few hundred yards. The drop-off was anywhere from four hundred to a thousand feet to the bottom of the gorge." Koto-ri, 10 miles from Chinhung-ni, was occupied on November 10, the 175th anniversary of the birthday of the U.S. Marine Corps.

The next day, the weather turned bitterly cold. The temperature dropped 40 degrees in a few hours, plunging to 8 degrees below zero by nightfall. A 20-



Montross and Canzona, *Chosin Reservoir Campaign*

to 30-knot wind only compounded the misery of the marines. Col. Homer L. Litzenberg, commander of the 7th Marine Regiment, observed that men reporting to sick bay appeared to be suffering from shock. "Some of them would come in crying," he noted; "some of them were extremely nervous; and the doctors said it was simply the sudden shock of the terrific cold when they were not ready for it." The marines, in fact, as historians Lynn Montross and Nicholas A. Canzona later observed, were only at the start of what turned out to be "a prolonged operation in sub-zero weather without a parallel in the nation's history."

It took the marines five days to cover the 11 miles of mountainous road between Koto-ri and Hagaru-ri. A large village at the southern tip of the Chosin Reservoir that had been heavily damaged by bombing, Hagaru-ri had been designated as the forward base for X Corps' advance to the Yalu. On November 19, marine engineers began construction of a small airstrip on a flat piece of ground just southwest of the village. Because Hagaru-ri was located 4,000 feet above sea level, engineering manuals called for a minimum runway length of 7,600 feet to accommodate C-47s/R4Ds. It soon became clear, however, that the men of the 1st Engineer Battalion would be lucky if they could carve 3,000 feet out of the frozen ground.

The 5th and 7th Regiments of the 1st Marine Division reached Yudam-ni, about halfway up the west side of the Chosin Reservoir and 14 miles from Hagaru-ri, on November 25. Three infantry battalions and one artillery battalion of the 7th Infantry Division simultaneously advanced along the east side of the reservoir. Meanwhile, the 1st Marine Regiment protected the main supply route from Hagaru-ri to Koto-ri. Enemy opposition had been light throughout the advance.



Operations at Hagaru-ri airstrip, December 1950. A C-47 at the left is being loaded with wounded as the C-47 in the background begins its takeoff. The C-119 overhead is dropping supplies. USMC Photo.

Powerful Chinese forces hit the forward elements of X Corps on the night of November 27/28. Two Chinese divisions attacked the marine positions at Yudam-ni, while a third Chinese division cut the supply road between Yudam-ni and Hagaru-ri. Almond immediately called upon Combat Cargo Command to airdrop supplies to the trapped unit around the reservoir.

On November 29, 12 C-119s from the 314th Troop Carrier Group delivered 63.9 tons of supplies to the marines at Yudam-ni. The drop included two “Baldwins,” prepackaged 16-ton loads of weapons, ammunition, water, rations, and medical supplies intended to supply an infantry battalion for one day. Five C-47s from the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron dropped an additional 10.9 tons of ammunition and medical supplies. The next day, 17 C-119 sorties delivered 86.8 tons, including two Baldwins, to the marines as they prepared to fight their way southward toward Hagaru-ri. Also, one C-47 dropped 2.2 tons of ammunition at Yudam-ni while two C-47s parachuted 4.4 tons of ammunition and medical supplies to the marines holding Hagaru-ri. Finally, one C-47 dropped 2.2 tons of ammunition to the encircled defenders of Koto-ri.

Maj. Gen. Oliver P. Smith, commander of the 1st Marine Division, recognized that it was essential to hold Hagaru-ri if his men were to escape the Chinese trap. On November 28, he had ordered a relief convoy sent from Koto-ri to Hagaru-ri. Task Force Drysdale, however, was ambushed by Chinese troops on November 29. It lost 162 men killed or missing and 159 wounded, plus 75 vehicles. Nonetheless, a portion of the force—some 400 U.S. marines and Royal Marine Commandos—managed to escape. “The casualties of Task Force Drysdale were heavy,” Smith acknowledged, “but by its partial success



A C-47 making an airdrop at Yudam-ni, November 29, 1950. USMC Photo.

the Task Force made a significant contribution to the holding of Hagaru which was vital to the Division.”

The next day, November 30, Almond and Smith met at Hagaru-ri to consider a plan of action. Almond stressed the need for speed during the evacuation of X Corps forces from the Chosin Reservoir area to Hamhung. He authorized Smith to destroy any equipment that might delay the withdrawal and he promised aerial resupply. Smith responded that his movements had to be governed by the ability to evacuate his wounded. He would have to fight his way out and would need his heavy equipment.

By December 1, it had become clear that Combat Cargo would have to make a supreme effort to support the extraction of the besieged forces of X Corps. Tunner’s command, which had airdropped less than 400 tons of emergency supplies during the first five months of the war, would have to increase its ability enormously if the needs of the trapped forces were to be met. At a conference at FEAF headquarters in Tokyo on December 1, it was decided to devote all C-119s in the theater to the Chosin Reservoir airdrops. The Flying Boxcars were ideal for this mission. Whereas C-47s required multiple passes over drop zones (DZs) to unload two tons of cargo from the side door, the larger C-119s were fitted with rollers that permitted six tons of cargo on pallets to be dropped in a single pass.

Preparation for the airdrops occurred at Ashiya. The army’s 2348th Quartermaster Company was responsible for packing, handling, and delivering the cargo. Although the company operated on a 24-hour basis during the emergency, the workforce still had to be expanded to meet the increased need. Other army personnel at Ashiya were pressed into service, but the answer to the problem was the hiring and training of 200 Japanese workers.

Cargo at Ashiya was packaged in 200- to 300-pound breakaway bundles, rigged with either 18-foot G-19 parachutes for lighter bundles or G-1s with 24-foot canopies for heavier loads. Five or six of the breakaway bundles were then placed on a 4-foot-square, half-inch-thick plywood pallet. A C-119 could hold seven of these pallets, which were placed on four rows of skaterollers. Before takeoff, the C-119’s rear clamshell doors would be removed.

Two members of the 2348th Quartermaster Company rode in the back of the airplane as “kickers.” As the C-119 neared the DZ, the kickers would untie the cargo as the pilot slowed the aircraft to 110 knots. DZs were usually small, sometimes only 100 yards long, and frequently unmarked. The pilots would often be assisted in identifying the proper area by a forward air controller (FAC) in a T-6 or a jeep.

The C-119 would approach the DZ at a constant speed in level flight to prevent fouling of the small parachutes. As a consequence, the Flying Boxcars were vulnerable to enemy fire. Fortunately, the Chinese owned few antiaircraft guns, so the C-119s usually had to contend only with small arms fire. Over the DZ, the pilot rang the emergency bell and nosed up the aircraft slightly. At that moment, the kickers cut the final sling restraining the pallets and the load slid from the rear of the aircraft in fewer than six seconds.



Between December 1 and 6, 238 C-119 sorties dropped 970.6 tons of cargo to the marines and soldiers of X Corps, mainly at Hagaru-ri and Koto-ri. The high point of this massive airdrop effort came on December 5 when 63 C-119 sorties delivered 297.6 tons of ammunition, medical supplies, and gasoline to the frozen troops. "There can be no doubt," Smith acknowledged, "that the supplies received by [airdrop] proved to be the margin necessary to sustain adequately the operations of the division during this period."

## Ordeal at Hagaru-ri

While Combat Cargo Command's 60 operational C-119s were dedicated to the airdrop mission, Tunner's C47s concentrated on the evacuation of wounded from Hagaru-ri. The airstrip there was only 40 percent completed by November 30. Oriented north-northwest to south-southeast, it measured 2,500 feet by 50 feet and had a hump at one end and a 25-foot dike at the other. Approaches would have to be made directly over Chinese-infested mountains to the west and south of Hagaru-ri, with landings directed toward the dike. Takeoffs would then be in the opposite direction, away from the dike, gaining altitude while traversing a valley with Chinese positions on either side. Despite these hazards, the situation at Hagaru-ri had become so critical that Tunner decided to order the airlift.

The first C-47 touched down on the snow-covered strip at 1430 on November 30. After 24 casualties had been loaded on board, the pilot put the wheels of the C-47 on the end of the strip, increased power to the engines until the aircraft's tail wheel rose off the ground, then released his brakes. The C-47 shot forward, staggered off the ground, slowly gained enough altitude to clear the hills to the south, and headed toward Yonpo, 20 minutes away. Eight additional missions were flown into Hagaru-ri before dark, four by the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron and four by R4Ds of the 1st Marine Air Wing. In all, 143 casualties were brought out on the first day of operations.

The tempo of the airlift increased on December 1. During the night of December 1/2, the survivors of the four army battalions that had been ambushed on the east side of the reservoir reached Hagaru-ri. At the same time, the trapped marine regiments at Yudam-ni had begun their breakout to the south. They entered the increasingly crowded Hagaru-ri perimeter on December 3 and 4, adding 1,500 casualties—approximately one-third suffering from frostbite—to the growing number of patients that required evacuation.

Combat Cargo Command rose to the challenge, carrying more than 2,000 casualties to safety in the first four days of December. The numbers were impressive: 375 patients were flown out on the first of the month, 609 on the second, 468 on the third, and 1,021 on the fourth.

December 5 brought a maximum effort at Hagaru-ri. Capt. Paul C. Fritz, who flew the Yonpo-Hagaru-ri shuttle during early December, recalled

a scene to end all scenes for most any man, even a military man. . . .



Artillery ammunition is being off-loaded from a Combat Cargo C-47 at Hagaru-ri as a group of walking wounded wait to board. December 5, 1950.

Ten thousand pictures could not convey the composite sensations to the viewer; significantly the smell—a horrible, pungent combination of blood on filthy combat fatigues, unwashed bodies, spent gunpower, and vehicle exhaust fumes—all accented in the nostrils by subfreezing temperatures. Nor could pictures convey the miserable bone-chilling cold (stunning to this ex-Minnesotan) at this altitude in the high country of northeast Korea.

Fritz usually carried 35 wounded men on each trip from Hagaru-ri. At one point, he crammed 42 casualties plus a radio repairman into his C-47, resulting in a total of 46 souls on board. The aircraft barely managed to stagger into the air. He decided that the normal load of 35 would be honored on subsequent flights.

Fritz also brought out a more melancholy cargo.

These weren't wounded Marines, they were beyond that. They were stacked along each side of the cabin with a narrow aisle in the center, zig-zagging around askew extremities. Clad only in the now-typical dirty and blood-soaked combat fatigues, their contorted faces and bodies were frozen solidly just as they had fallen. The loaders had neatly intertwined arms and legs, thrust in all directions, to conserve space, and then secured the stacks with ropes for stability in flight. Gruesome as it was, reason told me this was the only way at hand to ensure their proper burial location and an honored funeral at home, for which they had paid the dearest price. Something told me I should make this flight with dignity, however you do that. I flew my aerial hearse extra smoothly.

The 21st Troop Carrier Squadron flew 44 missions into the perimeter on December 5, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing flew 10, and a detachment of C-47s



Casualties being loaded aboard Combat Cargo C-47s at Hagaru-ri, December 1950. The hills in the background are controlled by Chinese troops. USMC Photo.

from the Royal Hellenic Air Force flew 8. The 62 sorties brought in 254,851 pounds of freight and 81 replacement marines. They took out 1,561 casualties and 12,200 pounds of cargo. Unfortunately, there was neither the time nor the space on the airplanes to bring out all the bodies of the dead.

The marines began withdrawing from Hagaru-ri at first light on December 6, heading toward Koto-ri. Between November 30 and December 6, Combat Cargo Command had delivered 532,115 pounds of urgently needed supplies and 615 replacements to Hagaru-ri. C-47s from the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and the Royal Hellenic Air Force had brought out 4,327 casualties and 99,100 pounds of cargo.

The operation at Hagaru-ri had cost two aircraft. One C-47 crashed off the end of the strip while attempting to take off. Escorted by U.S. Marine Corps fighters, the crew and passengers returned to the safety of the perimeter. The cylinder head on the engine of another C-47 broke loose just as the aircraft landed at Hagaru-ri, and it could not be repaired. Both C-47s were destroyed by the marines before leaving the village.

On the ground, the column of 10,000 men and 1,000 vehicles took 38 hours to cover the 11 miles to Koto-ri. Initially, Koto-ri had a tiny airstrip, suitable only for single-engine light observation airplanes, which were used to evacuate casualties. Anticipating the arrival of the men from Hagaru-ri, Col. Lewis B. Puller, commander of the 1st Marine Regiment, ordered the strip lengthened so that larger aircraft would be able to land. By December 7, the strip had been extended to 1,450 feet. Although torpedo bombers, borrowed from the navy by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, could now make carrier-style landings, thanks to the assistance of a paddle-wielding landing signal officer, the field remained inadequate for C-47s.

By December 8, marine engineers had managed to extend the strip to 1,750 feet. Despite a large slag pile on one end, the field was as good as it was going to get. That day, however, saw a heavy snowfall, causing the suspension of evacuation flights by light aircraft and the torpedo bombers. The first C-47,

however, somehow managed to find the field. "By a miracle," the official U.S. Marine Corps history recorded, "the plane landed safely and took off with 19 casualties."

December 9 saw the evacuation of Koto-ri in full swing. In all, 11 sorties by the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron and four by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing carried 292 casualties from the tiny snow-covered strip. A final Gypsy C-47 flight on December 10 brought out eight patients, marking the last day of operations from the Chosin Reservoir perimeter.

## A Bridge from the Sky

As the U.S. marines, soldiers, and a contingent of Royal Marine Commandos prepared to break out of Koto-ri, they faced a major problem. A key bridge across the Funchilin Pass, three and one-half miles south of Koto-ri, had been destroyed by the Chinese, and no possibility existed for cutting a bypass road. If the marines were going to bring out their vehicles, tanks, and artillery, the 16-foot gap (24 feet with abutments) would have to be spanned. U.S. Marine Corps engineers estimated it would take four sections of M-2 treadway bridge to do the job.

Tunner faced a challenging air delivery problem. Treadway bridge sections weighed 2,900 pounds, and each was 16 feet long. They had never before been dropped by an aircraft. On December 6, a C-119 made a test drop at Yonpo with disastrous results. Supported by two 24-foot parachutes, the load plunged to earth and was destroyed. Clearly, large parachutes would be required. G-5 parachutes with 48-foot canopies were flown to Yonpo, together with a special crew of army riggers.

The airdrop mission began on the morning of December 7. Three C-119s, each carrying a treadway span, reached the Koto-ri DZ at 0930. Directed by a FAC with the call sign "Distinctive 14," the first aircraft descended rapidly into the rugged terrain before leveling off at 800 feet above the ground and dropping the span. Although the span landed safely, the decision was made that succeeding drops would be from 1,000 feet to allow more time for the G-5 chutes to slow the rate of descent.

The next two C-119s also delivered their cargo without damage. Five additional C-119s dropped before noon; one span suffered damage, another fell behind Chinese lines.

On December 9, the marines began to fight their way south from Koto-ri, carrying with them the treadway spans. By late afternoon, the bridge was in place. "All night long on 9/10 December," the official U.S. Marine Corps history noted, "an endless stream of troops and vehicles poured across the span that was doubtless the world's most famous bridge for the moment."

The next day, December 11, the column reached the safety of the Hamhung-Hungnam perimeter, having completed one of the most successful fighting retreats in military history. For their contribution to the success of this operation, the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron, the 314th Troop Carrier Group,





Marines gaze at the gap in the bridge over the Funchilin Pass that must be spanned to permit them to bring out their equipment. The next day, December 10, 1950, the men are crossing on the treadway bridge that was airdropped to them and that they have installed overnight. USMC Photo.



and the 801st Medical Air Evacuation Squadron received well-deserved Distinguished Unit Citations, the first combat awards earned by air force units in the Korean War.

The evacuation of X Corps from Hamhung began on December 12. Although most of the men and matériel would be moved by sea, Combat Cargo Command was called upon to take a major role in the operation. Tunner directed all C-119s, C-54s, and C-46s to Yonpo to undertake the most concentrated airlift operation of the war.

The tempo of the airlift started slowly on December 12 and 13 when 340 tons of matériel were flown out of Yonpo. The next three days, however, saw a maximum effort by Combat Cargo Command. C-119s and C-54s left Ashiya in the mornings, flew to Yonpo, then made two shuttle runs between K-27 and Pusan or Taegu before heading back to Japan. At the same time, C-46s were flying from Brady to Yonpo to Pusan, then returning to Japan.

In all, Tunner's airlifters flew 393 sorties from Yonpo during the three days of concentrated effort, hauling out 2,089 tons of cargo, 3,891 passengers, and 228 casualties. The 314th Troop Carrier Group led the way with 176 sorties. Its C-119s brought out 439 vehicles, mainly jeeps and trailers, but also cement mixers and a road roller.

Combat Cargo Command had two weeks' rest following the closure of Yonpo on December 17. The hiatus came to an end, however, when the Chinese launched a major offensive on December 31. As Eighth Army retreated southward, Tunner's airmen again found themselves conducting emergency evacuations. Between January 1 and 5, 1951, Combat Cargo Command flew out 4,757 tons of cargo and 2,297 patients, mainly from the Seoul area before it fell to the enemy on January 4.

Desperate for airlanded supplies, Eighth Army engineers carved out emergency airstrips near the front lines at Wonju and Chungju. Consisting of 2,000 feet of bulldozed frozen mud that became slippery when softened by sunshine or rain, the strips were marginal, at best, for C-47s. Airlift historian Annis G. Thompson quoted some irate Combat Cargo pilots as saying, "Any resemblance between runways at these locations and [proper] airstrips [is] strictly accidental."

Eighth Army wanted to hold Wonju, an important road junction in the mountains of central Korea and a key link in the "Dog" line, the last of four defensive positions designed to stop the enemy offensive. With roads into the city virtually impassable due to heavy snow and guerrilla activity, the 2d Infantry Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. Robert B. McClure, needed to be resupplied by air. C-47s from the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron managed to land on the tiny airstrip near the city, bringing in 115 tons of urgently needed cargo and flying out the wounded. Also, C-119s from the 314th Troop Carrier Group air-dropped an additional 460 tons of supplies. While McClure was grateful for the help and commended both units, he was unable to hold the position and had to retreat southward.

Air operations shifted to Chungju, 25 miles south of Wonju. Again, only

C-47s could use the 2,000-foot strip of frozen mud that had been hastily leveled by army engineers on a high bank at the bend in a river. Eighth Army's needs for gasoline, however, became so critical that a decision was made to attempt C-46 operations into Chungju. Engineers extended the strip by 400 feet and sprinkled it with gravel, hoping to provide better braking action for the larger transports. On January 8, a stream of C-46s from Ashiya, each carrying six tons of gasoline in drums, began arriving over Chungju at five-minute intervals. The first three airplanes landed safely, parked near the edge of the strip, and started to unload their cargo. But the next C-46 landed short, wiped out its landing gear on a hump at the end of the runway, and careened into two of the parked aircraft. Although bystanders managed to extract the badly injured pilot and copilot before the aircraft caught fire, both airmen died before reaching the hospital. The three aircraft were destroyed.

Tunner halted operations at Chungju for two days while engineers worked to improve the strip. The night before operations were scheduled to restart, however, the temperature rose above freezing, and a light rain fell. As a result, the top two inches of frozen sod turned to mud. Below that lay a solid sheet of ice. When flying resumed on January 11, everything went well until a C-46 landed long. The pilot tried to brake, but the surface proved too slippery and the airplane slid off the end of the runway. Fortunately, the crew suffered no injury and the badly damaged transport did not block the strip for incoming traffic.

Landing at Chungju continued into the afternoon without further incident. Then, another C-46 landed long and careened off the end of the runway, wrecking the aircraft but causing no injuries. Shortly thereafter, a third C-46 hit a passing army tank on a nearby road when coming in for a landing. The aircraft crashed and was destroyed. Again, the crew escaped injury.

The loss of six aircraft in two days of operations convinced Tunner that Chungju could never accommodate C-46s safely. Gasoline drums would have to be airdropped by C-119s. Nevertheless, Chungju remained important for Eighth Army, and C-47s brought in ammunition and medical supplies and carried out wounded. By January 24, Combat Cargo aircraft had airlanded 495 tons of supplies at the forward airstrip.

## Reorganization of Combat Cargo

When the Chinese offensive finally ground to a halt in late January 1951, Tunner was able to turn his attention to the future of airlift operations in Korea. In October 1950, when it had seemed the war would soon end, Tunner recommended that Combat Cargo Command, a temporary organization, be continued as "a major command of the Far East Air Forces, that it be manned by permanently assigned personnel, and that it be manned as soon as practicable to be administratively and logistically, as well as operationally, self-sufficient." The appearance of Chinese forces in northern Korea, however, delayed implementation of Tunner's recommendations.

Stratemeyer agreed that Combat Cargo Command should be replaced by a regular unit with permanently assigned personnel. As soon as the situation in Korea permitted, Stratemeyer acted. Accordingly, FEAF discontinued Combat Cargo Command on January 25, 1951, and activated 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo). Tunner stayed in Japan until February 8, when he was relieved by Brig. Gen. John P. Henebry. A bomber commander in World War II with limited troop carrier experience, Henebry promptly appointed Lt. Col. Phil Cage of the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron as his deputy.

Combat Cargo Command left behind an impressive record of airlift accomplishment. In its four and one-half months of existence, the organization had flown 32,632 sorties, carrying 130,170.3 tons of cargo and 155,294 passengers. Tunner was especially proud of the unit's medical evacuation effort: 72,960 casualties had been delivered to hospitals in Korea and Japan, with only one fatality en route. Combat Cargo Command had set high standards for the 315th Air Division.

A number of organizational changes accompanied the transition from Combat Cargo Command to 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo). Headquarters for the airlift moved from Ashiya Air Base in southern Japan to Fuchu, a suburb of Tokyo near Tachikawa Air Base. At the same time, the 315th took over aerial port responsibilities from the army, creating the 6127th Air Terminal Group. This move was squarely in line with Tunner's belief that efficiency required a single airlift organization to control all functions at aerial ports. Finally, the 1st Troop Carrier Group (Provisional) was absorbed into the 437th Troop Carrier Wing, a C-46-equipped Chicago reserve unit that had arrived in the theater in November 1950. The 1st Troop Carrier Group had accomplished a great deal since its organization in September, airlifting 27,736 passengers, 7,005 casualties, and 11,808 tons of cargo.

## The Airlift Continues

February 1951 saw bitter seesaw fighting in Korea. Suwon, which had been recaptured by Eighth Army on January 26, became the center of airlift operations. Combat Cargo delivered some 3,000 tons of cargo to Suwon during the month and flew out more than 4,000 casualties. Airdrop missions also continued, with the 314th Troop Carrier Group registering 614 sorties. Most of the airdrops were routine, but several came in response to emergencies.

The most dramatic of the emergency airdrops took place in mid-February. Strong Chinese forces had encircled three battalions of the 23d Infantry Regiment, a French battalion, and the 1st Ranger Company at Chipyeong-ni on Eighth Army's left flank. On the night of February 13/14, the Chinese launched a series of fierce attacks against the American-French positions. Although the Chinese assault was repelled, the defenders urgently needed a resupply of ammunition. Twenty-four C-119s made airdrops at Chipyeong-ni on February 14, encountering heavy ground fire from Chinese troops.

The enemy attacked with renewed vigor on the night of February 14/15.

Again, the U.N. troops held firm, but their ammunition supplies had been seriously depleted. With only 90 81-mm mortar rounds and 140 4.2-inch rounds available, resupply had become critical. The 315th Air Division again flew to the rescue. On February 15, 30 C-119s delivered ammunition to an area that now measured about one square mile. The defenders were able to beat off the Chinese assault and hold their position until a relief column arrived at 1700 on February 16.

In all, the Flying Boxcars flew 84 airdrop sorties into Chipyeong-ni, delivering over 400 tons of ammunition. Six aircraft were damaged by ground fire, but all completed their missions. The commander of the 23d Infantry Regiment termed the airdrops a “Godsend.” Thanks to the ammunition delivered by the C-119s and to the close air support by air force fighter-bombers, the men were able to withstand the Chinese attempt to destroy their regiment.

## The Munsan Airhead

On March 7, 1951, the Eighth Army again took the initiative, pushing north from Wonju. The offensive made rapid progress, and Seoul fell to the advancing U.N. forces on March 15. Planners in Tokyo had hoped to drop the 187th Regimental Combat Team in the Seoul area, but the speed of the U.N. advance caused the objective of the airdrop to shift to Chunchon. The new DZ had a number of advantages. Chunchon was an important rail terminus, just south of the 38th parallel in central Korea and a promising site for an airfield. The airborne troops would be dropped when the front line was 10 miles away and the two forces could be linked up within 24 hours. The operation, if successful, would trap a large number of enemy troops in flight northward.



Paratroopers from the 187th Regimental Combat Team leave a C-119 during a practice jump in Japan.



Paratroopers prepare to board C-46s for airdrop at Munsan, March 23, 1951.

On March 18, Eighth Army advised FEAF that D day would be March 22. Twenty-four hours before the planned drop, however, Chunchon fell to the swiftly moving U.N. forces. Eighth Army then switched the target to Munsan, 20 miles northwest of Seoul on the Imjin River, with the drop to take place on the morning of March 23.

The weather was excellent on D day. The first serial of 21 C-119s, led by the commander of the airborne delivery phase of Operation Tomahawk, Col. Richard W. Henderson of the 314th Troop Carrier Group, took off from Taegu at 0730, formed up, and headed for Munsan. All aircraft made accurate drops at 0900 as Henebry in his C-54 command ship looked on. The second serial of 26 C-46s, however, encountered trouble. The lead aircraft turned back with a runaway propeller, and the deputy commander missed the DZ by a half-mile. The other aircraft in the serial dropped on the lead, compounding the problem.

The operation got back on track when 28 C-46s of the third serial, led by Colonel Nigro, an experienced airlifter, dropped squarely on target. The fourth serial, composed of 28 C-119s, also delivered its troopers accurately. In all, the 49 C-119s and 53 C-46s dropped 3,447 members of the 187th Regimental Combat Team into Munsan.

Delivery of the unit's heavy equipment posed a more difficult problem. Due to the shortage of C-119s, Henebry had to schedule two equipment drops by the same aircraft. On the morning of

Paratroopers board C-119s for the Munsan airdrop on March 23, 1951.





D day, 23 C-119s made an excellent drop in the face of increasing ground fire. One aircraft, however, caught fire after its drop; five crew members managed to bail out before an explosion destroyed the aircraft, killing the pilot and copilot. The other transports in the serial returned safely to Ashiya to take on another load of heavy equipment. Henebry was able to muster 28 C-119s for the afternoon drop. One aircraft received minor damage from small-arms fire, while a second dropped its load prematurely when a restraining strap broke while en route to the DZ. The two heavy equipment drops delivered 277 tons to the 187th Regimental Combat Team.

The paratroopers faced only weak opposition on the ground and established a defensive perimeter by noon at the cost of one killed and 18 wounded. The linkup with advancing Eighth Army units came within 24 hours. To the chagrin of senior commanders, only 87 Chinese soldiers were captured; the major enemy units had already escaped northward.

The Munsan airdrop, like the earlier Sukchon-Sunchon operation, had little tactical value. Munsan could have been taken easily by the Eighth Army's ground offensive. Like the Sukchon-Sunchon experience, however, the drop could be rated a success, at least as a realistic training exercise.

In March, the workhorse C-119s of the 315th Air Division began to show the strain of their heavy use. Engines on two aircraft separated in flight, causing the loss of one C-119 and resulting in heavy damage to the other. After an inspection revealed that dangerous conditions existed throughout the fleet, Henebry ordered all Flying Boxcars grounded on March 30. Repairs and modifications started immediately, but the first C-119 was not returned to service until April 12. Many aircraft remained grounded until late May.

Fortunately, a significant number of modified C-119s were available to permit a major airlift of ammunition to Korea beginning on May 20. The Chinese launched a vicious offensive in mid-May when some 175,000 men struck



C-119 unloads at an airfield near the frontlines in Korea, June 1951.

the Eighth Army. The U.N. forces responded with a massive artillery bombardment. X Corps alone received authorization to fire 250 rounds per gun per day, requiring the delivery of 20 truckloads of artillery ammunition per hour. This rapid rate of fire quickly depleted Eighth Army's stores of ammunition.

Combat Cargo initiated a maximum effort on May 20. Between May 20 and June 10, Henebry's airlifters delivered 23,825 tons, mostly artillery shells, to Korea. Lt. Gen. James A. Van Fleet, commander of Eighth Army, later said that the airlifted artillery ammunition had been a decisive factor in stopping the Chinese offensive.

June saw numerous airdrops to U.N. forces, especially to ROK units on the eastern end of the front. One of these missions proved costly for Combat Cargo. On June 3, three C-119s were assigned to drop supplies to the 5th ROK Division. When they arrived in the vicinity of their briefed coordinates, the aircraft began to circle while the troops laid out "T" panels to identify the DZ. It was just at this point that a C-119 was hit. "We heard three loud explosions," recalled Capt. James Hill, pilot of the lead C-119, "and saw the plane going down fast with a twisted boom." The next C-119 in the formation pulled up sharply in an effort to avoid the debris from the stricken aircraft. It went into a backward loop, plunged 3,000 feet to the ground, and exploded. It turned out that friendly fire—proximity-fused shells from U.S. artillery—had cost the lives of 10 crew members.

Airdrops continued following this tragedy, although pilots took pains to insure that artillery units knew the location and time of airdrops. During June, the 314th Troop Carrier Group airdropped nearly 1,000 tons, with most of the supplies going to ROK units. This brought the total of airdropped cargo during the first six months of 1951 to 10,640 tons. C-46s were responsible for about 1,000 tons of this total, with C-119s delivering the remainder.

By the end of June, Beijing had become convinced that the war could not be won. Armistice negotiations began in July. They were destined to last two long and frequently bloody years as both sides dug in along the 38th parallel.

## Routine Operations

Operations by Combat Cargo became less urgent and more routine as the battlefield stabilized. As troop carrier historian John Warren has observed, "No new tactical experience of major significance was gained by Combat Cargo after June 1951."

The only exception to this generalization came with the introduction of C-124 Globemasters into airlift operations. While recognizing that the large transports required long (greater than 7,000 feet), hard-surfaced runways and would have only limited value in Korea, Combat Cargo wanted to test them on high-density routes between Korea and Japan. In September 1951, Air Proving Ground Command sent a Globemaster to Korea for trials. While the C-124 certainly offered great advantages over existing transports (it could carry four or five times the load of a C-46, C-54, or C-119), the ability of Korea's run-

ways to handle the 105-ton giant remained to be seen.

The tests went well. The C-124 landed at Seoul, Taegu, and Pusan without damaging the runways. Despite its great weight, the Globemaster's large tires distributed its heavy load so that the tire pressure per square inch was only 75 pounds. During the trials, the C-124 airlifted 167 patients from Pusan to Itami, Japan, setting a world's record. Finally, on October 21, it carried 50,000 pounds of hand grenades from Ashiya to a marginal airstrip at Chunchon.

Henebry was satisfied with the performance of the Globemaster. "We would like to have a lot of them here," he said following the tests. "We can use them." Three squadrons of the 374th Troop Carrier Wing were equipped with C-124s in 1952. During their first six months of operation, the Globemasters flew nearly 400 sorties and carried 92,000 passengers, 16,000 tons of cargo, and 3,300 patients.

Of Combat Cargo's "routine" operations, none were more appreciated by soldiers and airmen in Korea than the rest and recreation (R&R) flights to Japan. The R&R program began in December 1950 when a group of army troops was flown from Kimpo to Ashiya. The men then went by bus to an R&R reception center at Camp Kokura, where they were given a shower, clean clothes, a good meal, and, best of all, five days' leave. By April 1951, the R&R program had carried its 25,000th passenger. The total reached 100,000 in September 1951 and 200,000 in March 1952.

Perhaps the most challenging flying that was done by Combat Cargo pilots during the years of stalemate involved Operation Beachcomber. In the summer of 1951, C-47s from the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron assumed responsibility for supporting a string of U.N.-held islands off both coasts of Korea that housed radar and radio stations, air rescue helicopter and crash-boat detachments, and intelligence operations. Chodo, the northernmost of these islands, was located only 78 miles from the Yalu River. Landings at Chodo had to be made on a curving beach at low tide and were always an adventure, as tall cliffs rose at both ends of the beach. On one of the first flights to the island, a C-47 pilot misjudged the turbulence from these cliffs and plunged into the ocean on his approach to the beach, killing eight people.

Fortunately, this proved the only fatality in Operation Beachcomber. Until the armistice in 1953, Gypsy C-47s brought in supplies and personnel and carried out rescued airmen, POWs captured on mainland raids, and other cargo from these isolated outposts, some of which were less than three miles from the enemy coast.



C-47 on the beach at Chodo during Operation Beachcomber, September 1952

## Organizational Changes

The year 1952 was marked by major organizational changes in Combat Cargo. In April, the 403d Troop Carrier Wing, a reserve unit from Portland, Oregon, arrived in Japan and took operational control of the 314th Troop Carrier Group and 21st Troop Carrier Squadron. As senior officer assigned to the 315th Air Division, Brig. Gen. Chester E. McCarty, commander of the 403d Wing, assumed command of the airlift.

McCarty got off to a rough start. Early in May, Combat Cargo experienced its worst flying day of the war. A C-46 struck a 4,500-foot peak on a low-level training flight over Kyushu, killing four crew members. Then, as noted earlier, eight men died when a Gypsy C-47 crashed into the sea while attempting a hazardous beach landing. Finally, as if to confirm the old adage that air disasters come in threes, four crewmen died when a C-119 from the 403d Troop Carrier Wing hit a 1,200-foot hill while making a nighttime ground controlled approach to Ashiya.

If May brought tragedy to Combat Cargo, it also brought a measure of triumph. On May 17, McCarty was alerted for an emergency airlift of the 187th Regimental Combat Team from Ashiya to Pusan. The men were urgently needed to restore order at a large POW camp on Kojedo Island, near Pusan. McCarty threw the full resources of his command into the effort. Only 17 hours were required to move the troopers and their equipment to Korea in what airlift historian Annis G. Thompson has termed “the fastest and most efficient air combat move of the entire war.” Gen. Mark W. Clark, newly appointed to the Far East Command, commended the efforts of Combat Cargo. “The speed with

which your aircraft were marshalled,” he wrote, “and the efficient manner in which troops and equipment were loaded and delivered to Pusan reflect highly upon the initiative, planning, training and spirit of your command.”

## Contributions of Combat Cargo

By the time the truce was finally signed in Korea on July 27, 1953, Combat Cargo had compiled a distinguished record. In three years of operation, the airlifters carried 697,000 tons of cargo and 2,650,000 passengers. Some 18,000 tons of cargo were airdropped, many times in emergencies. Air evacuation of wounded came of age during the Korean War. Combat Cargo carried 314,000 patients in the greatest air evacuation of casualties in medical history. Three nurses and four medical technicians lost their lives in air evacuation operations. No patients were killed in air crashes, but six died on December 22, 1952, when a jet fighter that was making a nighttime takeoff from Suwan hit a Royal Hellenic C-47 on the runway.

Combat Cargo made a number of significant contributions to the success of U.N. forces in Korea. Airlifted supplies, for example, proved essential to the northern advance of Eighth Army after the Inchon landing. The retreat of X Corps from the Chosin Reservoir area could have turned into a debacle without the assistance of Tunner’s airlifters. And, as Van Fleet acknowledged, airlifted ammunition made the difference in stopping the Chinese spring offensive of 1951.

Tunner, however, was convinced that much more could have been accomplished. With additional crews and maintenance support, he argued, 8,000 tons could have been airlifted daily to Eighth Army during its northern advance, instead of the 1,000 tons daily that were requested at that time. Such an increase in supplies, Tunner believed, might have brought an early end to the war by allowing Eighth Army to reach the Yalu River before the Chinese troops could intervene.

## Lessons Learned

The lessons of the Korean War reinforced what Tunner had learned during World War II and the Berlin Airlift. Above all, centralization of authority was crucial to success. Air transport, he stressed, should be “an integral part of the overall transportation system required to support a campaign or operations,” and it must be concentrated in one organization, with mission assignments by the theater commander.

The second cardinal principle concerned efficiency. “High aircraft utilization,” Tunner emphasized, “is the key to efficient air transportation.” Efficiency had suffered during the Korean War because of too few aircrews, maintenance supplies, and technical personnel. During the Berlin Airlift, Tunner had three crews per aircraft, and obtained eight to ten hours of daily usage. In Korea, he had less than half that number of crews per aircraft. He also lacked the



necessary maintenance supplies and personnel for extended daily operations. With a daily flying rate of eight hours, Tunner's 80 C-119s could have accomplished a great deal. Under existing limitations, however, he could use the transports only two to three hours per day.

The lack of suitable airfields for C-119s and C-54s also limited the effectiveness of the airlift in Korea. Combat Cargo responded to this shortage by turning to airdrops, an inefficient and expensive means to deliver supplies. There was a pressing need for engineers and engineering equipment to provide more suitable terminal facilities.

Tunner recognized the shortcomings of the aging C-47s, C-46s, and C-54s. Even the more modern C-119s were not without their problems. The airplanes looked like their nicknames—Flying Boxcars. While they afforded a good payload and were configured for efficient airdrops, they also flew like winged boxcars. Fully loaded C-119s had only marginal performance on a single engine, and Tunner would not use them for medical evacuations or to carry passengers.

The air force, he argued, needed three types of transports: long-range, heavy-lift airplanes for worldwide routes; medium-range aircraft to move oversized equipment for airborne operations; and four-engine transports that could use marginal strips and replace the workhorse C-47s.

Looking toward the future, Tunner wanted to see all military airlift assets placed into a single command. Planned production and procurement programs, he pointed out, indicated that there would be insufficient transports to handle the military's worldwide requirements. "If this is true," he concluded,

we must prepare to use all available air transportation to the maximum extent possible on the highest priority missions, whether the missions are strategic or tactical. The only way this can be satisfactorily accomplished is by integrating all air transportation into one organization which will have the mission of standardizing the equipment, units and techniques in so far as possible.

His words would prove prophetic.

In common with their airlift brethren of World War II and Vietnam, the officers and airmen of Combat Cargo received little publicity during the Korean War—or after. The attention of the American people, and of air force historians, was captured by the dramatic air battles that took place over MiG Alley. The aces, men like Joseph McConnell and James Jabara, became the heroes of the Korean air war, not the pilots who flew C-47s into marginal strips at Hagaruri and Chungju. Decorations and recognition rarely came to the skilled airlifters whose career path had placed them at the controls of C-47s, C-46s, C-54s, and C-119s. They flew, however, with professional pride, sure in the knowledge that their task was essential for the successful prosecution of the war.

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